DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 336 EA 031 888

AUTHOR	Glass, Thomas E.
TITLE	The Superintendent Crisis: A Review by Search Consultants. ECS Issue Paper: Leadership.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States, 700 Broadway, Suite 1200, Denver CO 80203-3460. Tel: 303-299-3600; Fax: 303-296-8332; Web site: http://www.ecs.org. For full text: www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/ 28/25/2825.htm.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Selection; Administrators; Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; *Consultants; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Human Resources; *Leadership; *School Administration; *Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS	Reform Efforts; State Policy; State Role

ABSTRACT

The selection of a superintendent is the most important decision a school board will make. With that premise established, this brief study examines the superintendent search process and the state of the superintendent applicant pool. Data were gathered from 30 practicing search consultants who responded to a mailed questionnaire. The key findings were that the process is time-consuming and that the applicant pool is decreasing in size and quality. The findings suggest the following considerations for policymakers: (1) Training in superintendent-board relations, selection, and evaluation should be mandatory for school board members; (2) policymakers should consider means to develop portable interstate pension and retirement plans; (3) policymakers should explore ways to slow superintendent turnover and attract new applicants; (4) state departments of education should require search consultants to register; (5) states should consider providing grants to less-affluent school districts to help conduct superintendent searches; and (6) states should consider providing financial incentives to less-affluent districts to provide paid internships to district administrators with superintendent potential. This issue paper is the second in a series commissioned by the Education Commission of the States on issues relating to superintendent and school-board leadership. (WFA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 468 336

EA

Education Commission of the States

ECS Issue Paper

Leadership

700 Broadway, Suite 1200 Denver, CO 80203-3460 303.299.3600 Fax 303.296.8332 www.ecs.org

The Superintendent Crisis: A Review by Search Consultants

Thomas E. Glass
The University of Memphis

August 2001

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S.F. WALKER

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

EA 031 888

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EA

ECS Issue Paper

Leadership

Education Commission of the States

700 Broadway, Suite 1200 Denver, CO 80203-3460 303.299.3600 Fax: 303.296.8332 www.ecs.org

The Superintendent Crisis: A Review by Search Consultants

Thomas E. Glass
The University of Memphis
August 2001

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has commissioned Thomas E. Glass to design and conduct a series of leadership papers to gather information on issues relating to superintendent and school board leadership. These national studies build on a decade of work conducted by the American Association of School Administrators and focus not only on characteristics and demographics of the superintendency, but also on the status of school board/superintendent relations and functions. Following is the second commissioned paper. For more information, contact Katy Anthes, policy analyst, Education Commission of the States, 303-299-3635.

The views and opinions of the author are not necessarily those of the Education Commission of the States. To quote or use content of this paper, permission must be obtained from the Education Commission of the States and the author.

Overview and Findings

The selection of a superintendent is perhaps the most important decision made by a school board. The superintendent's close relationship to successful school reform is emerging as a centerpiece in school reform research and literature. If superintendent leadership is important for meaningful change and reform then superintendent selection is a critical event for both the school district and the community.

Several recent national studies verify anecdotal reports of a crisis in the superintendency and attempt to describe causes leading to fewer superintendent applicants in both quantity and quality. Only limited research, however, exists that focuses on the superintendent selection process. The only current source of practical information about superintendent searches is contained in various "School Board Member Manuals" authored by state school boards associations (NSBA, 1996). Appearing occasionally is a book chapter or brief journal article written to familiarize aspiring superintendents with the search process. In brief, there is no national database describing what actually occurs in superintendent searches conducted by boards and by contracted search consultants.

EA 031 888

This brief study does not attempt to create a comprehensive national database concerning superintendent searches conducted by contracted search consultants. Its primary purpose is to obtain feedback from practicing search consultants regarding the superintendent search process and the current state of the superintendent applicant pool.

To accomplish this study, the names and addresses of 70 search consultants/firms were obtained from superintendency vacancy advertisements in past issues of *Education Week*. Thirty consultants responded to a brief 23-item mail-out survey questionnaire. With one exception, all 30 consultants were practicing or retired superintendents. A low return rate was expected as search consultants often view their procedures and applicant pools as proprietary information. Most questionnaire items attempted to avoid issues consultants might feel to be invasive or lead to "negative press" about their business.

The 30 search consultants responding to the survey conducted 62 superintendent searches during the 2000-01 school year. Only six of the 62 searches reported occurred in rural districts. These districts tend to have much smaller budgets available for such searches. The remainder of the searches were conducted in suburban or urban districts.

The search consultants reported the following information about the status of superintendent application pools:

- Eighteen of the search consultants responded that applicant pools are decreasing in size. The average pool consisted of approximately 30 to 40 applicants.
- Ten of the search consultants responded that applicant pools are decreasing in quality. Only one consultant responded that such pools were increasing in quality.
- The consultants evaluated the level of preparation of applicants:
  - Four search consultants found applicant pools to be "very well- prepared."
  - Thirteen consultants found applicant pools "prepared."
  - Twelve respondents found applicant pools to have either "some" or "many" deficiencies.
  - Virtually all of the consultants gave applicants high marks with regard to the quality of academic preparation.
- The consultants cited several actions that would improve the quality and quantity of applicant pools, including (in order of priority):
  - Less board micro-management
  - Transportable retirement systems
  - Better qualified boards
  - Higher salaries and improved fringe benefits
  - A more positive media presence.
- The consultants also evaluated the skills of applicants who were finalists for vacant superintendent positions:
  - Strong marks were given to the finalists' skills in communication, community relations and leadership.
  - Lower marks were given to the finalists' skills in providing instructional leadership and financial management.

The search consultants reported on the skills they believed most important to superintendent success:

- Skills considered important to success include communication and interpersonal skills and school board relationship-building skills.
- Skills considered less important to superintendent success include skill in financial management and instructional leadership.

The search consultants reported the following information about the superintendent search process:

- A majority of searches last three to five months. The extensive time consumed by a search is a problem for many districts.
- Retirement is the chief reason given by consultants for superintendent vacancies. Superintendents not having a good relationship with the board or moving to larger districts are the second and third most mentioned reasons, respectively.
- A majority of the search consultants reported meeting with school boards four to six times during the search process. Search consultants typically meet not only with board members, but district staff and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

community members as they help develop a list of qualifications listed on the vacancy announcement.

- Twenty-one of the 30 search consultants indicate board members visit districts of finalists for superintendent vacancies. Such visits often are looked upon by employed superintendents as potentially damaging to the working relationship with their present board. Many superintendents believe this practice is not needed until an actual contract is offered.
- On average, four to six finalists are invited to attend in-district interviews. These finalists generally visit a district twice for separate interview sessions with the board, community members, parents, business community members, teachers, media and even students.
- Eleven of the search consultants reported encountering boards not working well together to the extent of interfering with the search.

Policy Questions To Consider

The study provides several interesting findings on how superintendent searches are conducted and the state of the typical applicant pool. Of great note is the fact that a majority of the consultants report that applicant pools are decreasing in size and that only one of the consultants surveyed believed that the quality of the applicant pool was increasing in quality. The survey findings suggest a series of policy questions that should be considered:

1. Search consultants see board micro-management and member quality as one of the key problems in restricting applicant quality. This echoes findings found in other studies. **Training should be mandatory for school board members in the area of superintendent/board relations, selection, evaluation and team management.**
2. Training also should be provided to help **minimize negative impacts associated with board visits to a candidate's current school district**. Such training could reduce the reticence of current superintendents in applying for an opening in another district.
3. Another means of broadening the potential applicant pool is to facilitate applications from out-of-state superintendent candidates. **Policymakers, therefore, need to consider taking steps to develop portable, interstate pension and retirement plans.** The search consultants in this study assigned a high priority to such transportable retirement systems in promoting the quality and quantity of superintendent applicant pools.
4. To slow superintendent turnover and attract new applicants, policymakers should explore offering **six-year contracts to experienced superintendents.** Many superintendents do not apply for new positions out of a lack of confidence in board continuity and fairness.
5. Policymakers should explore offering superintendent **contracts guaranteed against buy-out or termination.** A third party mediator might be required to accomplish this task.
6. To increase the potential pool of applicants available to all districts, **state departments of education should consider requiring search consultants to register and submit resumes available to all districts in the state.** In brief, a job clearinghouse would be created for superintendents, principals and central office administrators.
7. Only six of the 62 searches reported in this study occurred in rural districts. These districts tend to have much smaller budgets available for such searches. **States should consider providing grants for less wealthy school districts to conduct superintendent searches**. This might be coordinated through state professional associations.
8. States also should consider providing financial incentives for less wealthy districts to provide **paid internships for district administrators** possessing superintendent potential.

Thomas Glass is professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Memphis. He is the lead author of "The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: The Superintendent in the New Millennium" and sole author of "The American School Superintendency 1992, America's Education Leaders in a Time of Change." Both of these national studies were published by the American Association of School

Administrators. He is a former superintendent of schools and former faculty member at Washington State University, Northern Illinois University and the University of Detroit.

© Copyright 2001 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All rights reserved.

The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide organization that helps state leaders shape education policy. It is ECS policy to take affirmative action to prevent discrimination in its policies, programs and employment practices.

To request permission to excerpt part of this publication, either in print or electronically, please fax a request to the attention of the ECS Communications Department, 303-296-8332 or e-mail ecs@ecs.org.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").